

# GLOSSARY and GUIDE of JEWISH WEDDING TRADITIONS

*Please note: This is not a complete wedding guide. Please consult your Rabbi for an in-depth understanding of the wedding traditions in your community. Some customs and traditions may vary from community to community.*

## **Chossen/Chatan V'Kallah**

The Hebrew words for groom (chosen/chatan) and bride (kallah). The wedding couple is likened to a King and Queen and are to be treated with great honour on the day of their wedding and the week following.

## **Purchasing the Ring and Ketubah**

A marriage is legally binding according to Jewish law only when two witnesses (usually the Rabbi and chazzan) observe the transaction under the chuppah of the groom offering the ring to the bride and the bride's acceptance of this offer of marriage.

- The ring needs to be purchased by the Groom and be entirely of his possession until he offers it to his bride to become hers permanently.
- The ring should be a plain round gold band without any settings or engravings. Creative designs may be added to the ring after the wedding.
- The groom places the ring on the bride's right forefinger.

## **Jewish Meaningful Items**

While planning the wedding scheme and décor, don't forget about meaningful items that will add that extra touch of meaning to the wedding.

For example:

- charity boxes for each table encouraging guests to do a kind deed (even giving just a coin) in honour of the wedding
- benching cards
- yarmulkas
- adding words of Torah to the wedding speeches

## **Refined Attire**

A Jewish wedding is a holy and G-dly. Under the chuppah, the name of G-d is evoked. It is proper, therefore, for those present to be dressed with the respect owing to this occasion. What is fashionable on the dance floor may not be fashionable for a chuppah. It may be appropriate for the bride and the retinue members to wear shawls under the chuppah.

### **The Mikvah**

A bride immerses herself in the mikvah (a ritual immersion pool) prior to her wedding, with the purpose of spiritual purification in accordance with Torah law. There is a custom for a groom to immerse in a mikvah prior to the wedding as well. The Mikvah is an essential part of the the Jewish laws of Family-Sanctity which brides and grooms learn during the period of their engagement.

### **Week Before the Wedding**

There is a custom that the bride and groom not see each other in the week leading up to their wedding. This is for religious-spiritual reasons but there are many added benefits: It gives time for personal introspection, it prevents bride and groom from unintentionally hurting each other at this time of possible tension, and it increases the joy of bride and groom seeing each other again.

### **Shomer/Shomeret**

The word shomer (masculine)/shomeret (feminine) literally means a “guard.” In the days preceding and following the wedding, the shomer/shomeret can accompany the bride and groom wherever they go, as a king and queen would be accompanied. They can also act as the go-between the bride and groom during the time when the bride and groom do not see each other preceding the wedding. They can also make certain that the bride and groom arrive at the wedding safely and stress-free.

### **Aufruf (The Shabbat before)**

It is customary for a groom to be called up for an aliyah and recite a blessing over the Torah on the Shabbat before his wedding. As he prepares to build his new home and world, he looks for guidance and direction from the Torah. The congregation will often sing “Siman Tov u’Mazal Tov” to him and may shower him with sweets.

### **Shabbat Kallah (The Shabbat before)**

It is customary for the bride’s bride’s friends and loved ones to gather together to celebrate the bride on the Shabbat before the wedding. They bless her and bring her joy.

### **Like Yom Kippur (The wedding day)**

Because the bride and groom are starting a new life together, their wedding day is considered to be a personal Yom Kippur for each of them. For this reason, it is customary to add the Yom Kippur confession to their private afternoon prayers. This is also the reason why many couples fast on the day of their wedding.

### **Fasting**

There is a custom for both the bride and groom to refrain from eating and drinking on the day of their wedding. The fast begins at daybreak on the wedding and ends immediately after the Chuppah when they are served refreshments in the bridal room. Fasting attunes the bride and groom to the sanctity of the day. If there is a medical problem which necessitates some food, they try and do with the absolute minimum. They do not fast if it is the first day of the new month, the day after a holiday, or a holiday such as Chanukah.

### **Repentance, Prayer & Charity**

The wedding day is an appropriate time to engage in spiritual preparations including:

- Repentance - Fasting, reflecting on the holiness of the day, and resolving to add in one's Torah observance.
- Prayer - Utilizing the gift of prayer of the wedding day by asking G-d for true peace, health, happiness and nachas. Traditionally the afternoon prayer for Erev Yom Kippur which contains the Al Chet confession is recited.
- Charity – Giving a significant amount of money to charity on the wedding day.

### **Tena'im**

Tena'im are documents of betrothal similar to an engagement contract, agreed upon and signed by both a representative of the groom and a representative of the bride. It is considered a grave breach of honour to break this formal betrothal, and so it has become that the formal Tena'im not be signed until just before the wedding. The Tena'im are signed by two qualified witnesses at the Groom's Tisch.

### **Kabbalat Panim**

Kabbalat Panim, literally "Greeting of Faces," precedes the chuppah. During the Kabbalat Panim the bride and groom are truly graced in their roles as King and Queen for the day. The groom reigns at his personal "Tisch" and the bride sits on a throne-like chair surrounded by the women closest to her on this day. Many brides use this time to give out blessings to their friends.

### **The Groom's Tisch**

Tisch is the Yiddish word for "table". During the Groom's Tisch, male guests come to greet him and perhaps share a l'chaim in his honor. Songs may be sung, and often the groom -- or another person present -- delivers some words of Torah. During the Groom's Tisch, the official betrothal (the Tena'im – literally 'conditions') is concluded and the marriage contract (Ketubah) is signed. After the Tena'im is read aloud, there is the "breaking of the plate," a ceremony during which the bride and groom's mothers break a china or glass plate. The irreversible act of breaking a plate is symbolic of

the finality of the just-read *tena'im*.

### **The Ketubah**

The Ketubah is the authentic, traditional Jewish marriage contract that spells out the husband's obligation to his wife to sustain, honour and cherish her. The groom indicates his acceptance of his pledge in the presence of two witnesses, signs the Ketubah and two witnesses affix their signatures to the Ketubah.

### **Bedecken**

Before the Chupah ceremony, the groom, escorted by his father and (about to become) father-in-law, and accompanied by relatives and friends, goes forward to veil the bride. The groom lowers the veil over the bride's face. The covering of the face symbolizes the modesty, dignity and chastity which characterize the virtue of Jewish womanhood. The custom of the bride wearing a veil goes back to the Biblical matriarch, Rebecca, who veiled herself upon seeing her future husband, Isaac (Genesis. 24:65). She focused on the true power and beauty of a Jewish woman, the internal beauty that no cloth can hide. By viewing the bride carefully before placing the veil over the bride's face, the groom confirms that this is his intended bride, that he will not be deceived as was Jacob when Leah was substituted for Rachel (Genesis 29:23). Once the bride is veiled, she is given special blessings, usually by her father. The groom is then escorted out of the room to prepare for the chuppah.

### **Unterfihrrers (Chaperones)**

It is traditional, for both Bride and Groom to be escorted to the chuppah by unterfihrrers (chaperones) in a true royal fashion. Traditionally the unterfihrrers are a married couple (preferably a first marriage) who have children – a good omen for the bride and groom to be so blessed. When the bride and/or groom's parents are not married or if one is deceased or away, the parent who is present (or in the case of divorced parents who are both present - the parents) accompany their child to the chuppah, and in addition, a married couple walks immediately behind the Bride and Groom. There are various customs in regard to the unterfihrrer which can be discussed with the Rabbi.

### **The Procession to the Chuppah**

The procession from the Kabbalat Panim to the chuppah is usually as follows: Rabbi and Chazan followed by the Groom and his parents on either side of him, arm in arm; grandparents of the Groom (if present); flower girl and page boy (if applicable); the Bride accompanied by her parents (father and mother on either side, arm in arm); Maid or matron of Honour (if applicable); grandparents of the Bride (if present) and Bridesmaids. If there is a single grandparent, a grandchild

from the retinue may wish to accompany him/her up the aisle. Under the chuppah, the bride circles the groom seven times and then stands to his right.

### **Chuppah**

The chuppah, or wedding canopy, is a covering, often cloth, held aloft on four poles. The chuppah is symbolic of the first roof the bride and groom share together, representing their new home. The chuppah has no walls, encouraging the couple to follow in the ways of Abraham and Sarah, whose tent was always open to guests.

### **Seven Circles**

The bride customarily circles the groom 7 times under the chuppah. Some of the reasons:

- This parallels the seven days of creation, and symbolizes the fact that the bride and groom are about to create their own “new world” together.
- Seven circles correspond to the seven times in the Torah where it is written “...and when a man takes a wife.”
- When Joshua led the Children of Israel in the battle for the city of Jericho, he was instructed to circle the city seven times, resulting in the walls of the city crumbling. As two people enter into marriage, they face the challenge of breaking down the “walls” that may exist between them.

### **Kiddushin – Blessings & The Ring Ceremony**

The wedding ceremony begins with the Rabbi reciting a blessing over a cup of wine and a second blessing of sanctification over the marriage. Both the bride and the groom then drink from the cup. The groom then places a solid gold band on the right index finger of the bride and declares: "HAREI AT MEKUDESHEH LI B'TABAAT ZU K'DAT MOSHE V'YISRAEL" - “Behold, you are consecrated unto me with this ring according to the laws of Moses and Israel.” These two blessings and the giving of the ring, completes the betrothal ceremony.

To separate the first part of the wedding ceremony from the second part that follows, the Ketubah is read following the giving of the ring.

### **Reading of the Ketubah**

The Ketubah is read aloud first in the original Aramaic and, thereafter, an abstract of the Ketubah is read in English. The groom hands the document to the bride.

### **Nissuin**

A second cup of wine is filled and the second half of the wedding ceremony commences during

which the Sheva Brachot are recited. After the seven blessings are recited, the bride and groom then drink from the second cup.

### **Sheva B'rachot**

The Sheva Brachot are seven special blessings in honour of the wedding, that are recited both under the chuppah and at the end of the festive meal that follows the ceremony.

- The First Blessing is recited over a cup of wine as a sign of rejoicing.
- The Second Blessing thanks G-d for creating the world, and honours those assembled at the wedding.
- The Third and Fourth Blessings acknowledge G-d's physical and spiritual creation of humankind, an appropriate blessing for a wedding when the couple begins their life as complete human beings.
- The Fifth Blessing is a prayer for the restoration of Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the Holy Temple.
- The Sixth Blessing expresses the hope that the bride and groom grow in their love for each other, with a focus as exclusive as that of Adam and Eve, when there was no one else in the world.
- The Seventh Blessing is a prayer that the time of the Messiah will come to redeem the Jewish people from exile so that peace will reign over the world.

### **The Breaking of the Glass**

At the conclusion of the chupah ceremony, the groom smashes a glass with his foot, remembering that even at this time of simcha, our joy is not complete until the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. Psalm 147, "If I forget thee O' Jerusalem," is often recited or sung and all present think about our hope for true peace in Israel with the coming of Moshiach. At the sound of the breaking of the glass, the guests exclaim: "Mazal Tov!"

### **The Civil Marriage**

After the chupah, many sign the Marriage Register making the wedding civilly legal as well.

### **Yichud**

Immediately following the ceremony, the bride and groom, now husband and wife, are escorted to a private room where they have an opportunity to spend a few moments in each other's company (Yichud means alone-together). During this private time in the Yichud Room, they may not be disturbed.

### **The Reception**

### **Simchat Chatan V'Kallah**

It is considered a mitzvah (good deed) to bring joy to the bride and groom. Some guests may wear costumes, do acrobatics, and even set their hats on fire in their zeal to add to the joyous atmosphere. Much of the dancing is done in large circles – otherwise known as “Simcha Dancing.”

### **Siman Tov u'Mazal Tov**

A common song at Jewish weddings, “Siman Tov u'Mazal Tov” is a musical way of wishing the couple well. “Siman Tov” means a good sign. “Mazal Tov” means good fortune.

### **Mezinke Dance**

Although not a universal practice, some families include into the festivities the Mezinke - a customary dance of celebration reserved for parents who have just married off their last child. The happy parents are seated in the center of the dance floor, encircled by dancing guests.

### **Speeches**

It is appropriate for all the speeches to include meaningful messages which are based on Jewish thought and tradition.

### **Birkat Hamazon**

At the end of the festive meal, Birkat HaMazon (Grace After Meals/Bentching) is recited to thank G-d for the food and sustenance that has been enjoyed. This is followed immediately by a second recitation of the Sheva Brachot (Seven Blessings) repeating the same blessings that had been recited under the chuppah.

There are two cups of wine involved in the formal Birkat HaMazon. The first cup of wine is held by the one who leads the Birkat HaMazon, and after the Grace has concluded, the second cup is passed around to the individuals who are honoured with reciting six of the seven Sheva Brachot. The leader then recites the blessing over the wine, the seventh blessing. After the seven blessings are completed, the two cups of wine are blended together and divided among the bride, groom and leader to drink.

### **Sheva Brachot Week**

During the week following the wedding, it is customary for friends and relatives to host festive meals in honour of the new couple. This is called the week of Sheva Brachot because the seven blessings are repeated after the Grace After Meals at each of these festive meals.